

Perception, the new Mass texts, and the gay male subculture

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In addition to the always–fascinating but often convoluted tangle of threads at *Pray Tell* pertaining to the new Missal translation into English, several [recent threads](#) have discussed gay priests and the traditionalist liturgical movement.

Perhaps we can bring the two together, and, in the process, identify a potentially sensitive underlying issue that has rarely, if ever, been openly named.

My concern here is not about the translation process or the accuracy of its results (nor about the fact that the Latin base text cannot be absolutized because of numerous changes introduced into the 2002 *editio typica*.)

My concern has to do with public perception of the style of the English mass texts and consequently their reception (or lack of reception) at the parish level.

The writing style (if it can be said to have one...) employs an excess of adjectives. Separate phrases set off with commas do not connect smoothly with each other but seem to tumble headlong. Thoughts do not follow logically. Archaic words and expressions turn up constantly. The style appears to be an attempt to imitate nineteenth–century upper–class British, Oxbridge–educated discourse. The overall effect, it strikes me, is self–consciously arch, contrived, flagrantly overdone, fussy to the point of a theatrical cliché, and quite simply effeminate.

The text appears to emerge directly from the gay male subculture among some segments, at all levels, of the Roman Catholic clergy today.

Note that we are speaking here of perception. My intention is not to reinforce stereotypes or to out anyone in a church that condemns intimate homosexual relations as “intrinsically disordered.” But here lies the irony: as soon as these Mass texts become widely known, questions are likely to be raised that will do no favours to the hierarchy of a Church already damaged by scandal and suspicion.

As a woman I cannot help but find the frilliness of the new texts offensive. “Effeminacy” has nothing to do with real human women. It’s not even related to philosophical essentialism or to the common notion of female/male complementarity. Effeminacy is a satirical pastiche, a distillation of the most insulting stereotypes about women’s behaviour. The comic figure of a man dressing up and imitating a woman draws hearty laughter in many cultures and time periods: think of [Dame Edna Everage](#), [La Cage aux Folles](#) or [The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert](#), in just the past few decades.

But clearly the intent of those who constructed the new liturgical language was not to appear ridiculous – it was to appear holy, exalted in dignity and distanced from ordinary life. After all, the new translation is supposed to embody “sacred language.” One is left wondering how a small coterie of men dressed in laces and brocades, holding forth at the altar in prissy public prayer language, would be *in se* sacred.

I’ve been sharing these thoughts with some highly qualified colleagues and have heard a variety of responses. One colleague perceived that while the energy surrounding this type of liturgical language was certainly not straight it was also not gay, but instead a strange sort of mentality that this person could not quite identify. Another drew a convincing parallel with the thought patterns and behaviour characteristic of a clinically narcissistic personality. Another speculated that closeted gay men might be more likely to indulge in creating a fantasy world they could inhabit, a sort of out-of-body experience, and this definitely fits the bill. Others simply cheered me on for naming an unspoken reality.

I think that public perception cannot be underestimated. The Anglican Communion worldwide is facing possible schism due to questions related to same-sex orientation, and so is the Lutheran Church in the U.S. While, as some contributors to this blog have suggested, a number of the laity in the pews may not notice or may just write it off, I suspect many will react to the awkwardness and frilliness of the new prayer language, and find it highly suspicious to say the least. What will that do to the already wobbly credibility of the Roman Catholic Church as such or of the hierarchy in particular? And this time it cannot be blamed on the media. The Church, as an institution, did it to itself.